



Scaffolding Reflective Writing for the Portfolio of Evidence

Jennifer Masters

Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania

The 'Portfolio of Evidence' (PoE) is a requirement for every pre-service teacher in Australia. At the University of Tasmania (UTAS), the concept is introduced to commencing students and is then embedded across all units through assessment tasks. While the portfolio approach is generally well-aligned with teacher education, students can become over-whelmed with the perceived enormity of the task and develop the perception that the PoE is difficult and time consuming.

This paper reports on an initiative to target 'reflective writing' as a key to portfolio success. Students enrolled in an introductory unit called "Academic Literacies" are supported to write reflectively through a progressive workbook that breaks the process down into logical steps and culminates in a reflective report. The workbook is submitted for assessment and serves as an underpinning artefact for the student's PoE. If a student can learn to reflect naturally and confidently on evidence, the process is likely to become more comfortable for them and consequently their PoE will become a stronger representation of their learning journey.

Keywords: Teacher Education, Portfolio of Evidence, PebblePad, reflective writing

Introduction

The Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group (TEMAG, 2014) stipulated that all pre-service should keep a 'Portfolio of Evidence' in order to demonstrate that they are ready to teach on graduation. The University of Tasmania has been working towards the use of portfolios in all Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses in order to support students to meet this goal. Progress towards portfolio integration has been gradual, but steady progress is being made and the introduction of a portfolio platform (PebblePad) has been a catalyst for significant gain. As with any new venture, it is important to implement strategies for success and at UTAS, reflective writing has been identified an important skill for portfolio development.

Background

The pre-service teacher portfolio is a familiar device in teacher education (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Student teachers have always been encouraged to collect resources; examples of best practice, lesson ideas, teaching strategies, classroom activities and curriculum content. These resources may be sourced from other teachers while on professional experience or they could be from freely available content, for example from websites. Further, they are artefacts that the pre-service teacher creates for his or herself – assessment items, notes and recordings, teaching materials etc. In recent times, however, the portfolio has become more than simply ‘a collection’.

It is evident that the value of a portfolio lies not only with the product and the process is also significant. Oakley, Pegrum and Johnston (2014) identified that the purpose of a course based eportfolio was two-fold. It enabled pre-service teachers to build up a digital record of their learning journey mapped against graduate standards, but it also supported them to develop as reflective practitioners. The process of “portfolioing”, where students engage in a cycle of purposeful reflection and selection (see Figure 1), serves to hone advanced learning skills (Roberts, Maor and Herrington, 2016), including reflective thinking.

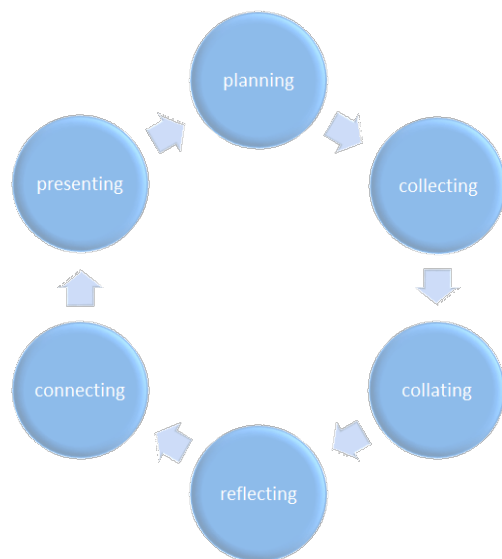


Figure 1: The portfolio cycle (Masters, 2016)

Reflective writing is assumed to be one of the easier types of writing in academia and pre-service teachers are required to ‘reflect’ from their very first days at university. Many students, however, have had only limited experience with this process and, without guidance or direction, struggle to move beyond superficial description (Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014). Reflective writing requires the writer to think beyond reporting. It requires a dimension of self-perception (Oakley, Pegrum & Johnston, 2014) and needs to extend into explanation, connection and interpretation (Cohen-Sayag & Fischl, 2012). These deep reflective skills can be taught, but they need support and must be practised over time (Ryan, 2011).

The use of prompts to “scaffold” writing is a mechanism to develop writing skills (Ryan, 2011). Roberts, Maor and Herrington (2016) suggest that a portfolio learning environment can be used to scaffold reflective thinking by using annotated learning tasks designed to target skills for reflection. These tasks fit together as parts of the whole, and allow students develop their reflective writing capacity as they progressively build their portfolio.

The Initiative

‘Academic Literacies’ is a First Semester, First Year foundation unit for many of the initial teacher education students in Education. It is, therefore, a logical cornerstone opportunity for portfolio training. The unit covers a broad spectrum of literacy skills, including the use of digital systems and tools used for teaching and learning, as well as more traditional skills such as academic writing. The very first assessment task in this unit is a reflective writing exercise and this seemed to be a logical place to introduce the use of PebblePad and support the development of the important skill of reflective writing for portfolio purposes.

Assessment Task 1 (AT1) requires the students to write a 750-word personal reflection on their literacies. The task description from the unit outline is:

You need to reflect on your own literacies. You should outline what you think is meant by literacies and reflect on your learning experiences. You will need to discuss the new challenges you face as new pre-service teacher, including the Faculty Numeracy and Literacy Competency tests that you have been asked to complete. You will then look to the future and identify how you can build and extend your literacies as you proceed on your learning journey.

In the most recent offering of the unit, students were asked to open and complete a PebblePad workbook instead of simply submitting a Word document for assessment. Although the actual writing task was largely unchanged from previous iterations of the unit, the workbook structure provided a scaffolding structure to help the students work through the task. The structure of the workbook is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: The structure of the AT1: Personal Reflection on Literacies PebblePad workbook

Title	Content
Overview	1. Reminder of the assignment brief 2. Purpose of the workbook
Getting Started	3. How to approach an assignment 4. Locate word count, due date, submission time (RF)
Planning	5. Breaking the task down – beginning, middle, end

Title	Content
	6. Writing notes – past, present, future (RF)
Introduction	7. Features of an introduction and the reflective writing genre 8. Examples of opening sentences 9. Introduction construction (RF, WC) 80-100 words
The Body	10. Sentence and paragraph conventions 11. Word count advice (530-570 words for the section) 12. PAST construction (RF, WC) 13. PRESENT construction (RF, WC) 14. FUTURE construction (RF, WC)
Conclusion	15. Features of a conclusion 16. Conclusion construction (RF, WC) 80-100 words
Submission	17. Submission instructions 18. Full submission construction (RF, WC) 750 words
All done	19. Congratulations on completion 20. Information about the submission and marking process

**RF = response field with prompts, WC = word counter*

This workbook served as a scaffold in a number of ways. Firstly, just breaking down the task into manageable steps was a support mechanism. This helped the students to locate key information in the task description and it gave them a clear starting point for their response. It then provided a pathway, with distinct stepping stones as they moved towards the desired goal.

The scaffolding mechanisms on each page of the workbook then provided in-context support for each section (See Figure 2). This text was written in second person (you/your) and provided proximate advice for completing each textbox on the page. At times, this information also included a model of the writing genre expected. The introduction page for instance, provided several opening lines such as, “I am confident that I will be able to cope with any literacy challenge presented to me at university”. This encouraged the use of first-person narrative and helped the students to consider how they might get started (often the hardest part of writing).

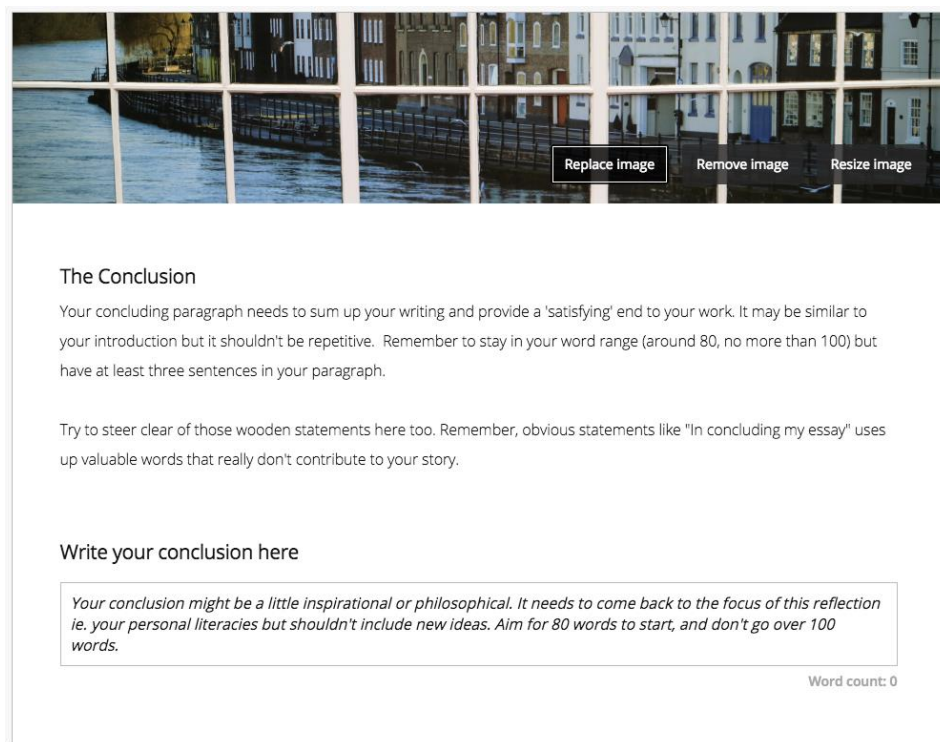


Figure 2: A PebblePad workbook page with writing prompts

Another subtle scaffold in the workbook used the 'word count' feature in PebblePad (See Figure 2). Although word limits weren't specified for each section, the final piece had a strict limit of 750 words. An ongoing narrative about monitoring word count and a word count display for text boxes meant that the students are more likely to balance their word count across the submission. This helped them avoid the trap of writing prolifically in the first sections and then squeezing the latter sections in order to come in under the 750-word cap.

Finally, the workbook encourages a reflection on the process and then a celebration of completion. The concept of 'polishing' is too often overlooked by writers, particularly when he or she is rushing to meet a deadline. This process is especially important for reflective writing because the process of reading back over a personal reflection is likely to evoke further insight and deeper thinking.

In Semester 1, 2018, 295 students completed and shared the workbook for assessment in PebblePad. This task provided a nice opportunity for the students to become familiar with and start using PebblePad in a supported way. It allowed students to get used to the 'look and feel' of PebblePad and become familiar with the terminology, such as asset, workbook, workspace and 'sharing for assessment' (rather than submitting). More importantly though, it introduced them to the genre of reflective writing. The use of first person narrative and professional reflection is an essential skill for pre-service teachers and this format is used predominantly for assessment in teacher education for tasks such as lesson plans, units of work, reflective journals, report writing and professional portfolios.

Discussion

A digital portfolio is a very powerful device that can be used to capture learning and growth over time. It can serve as a repository for evidence, a catalyst for developing reflective skills (Oakley, Pegrum & Johnston (2014) and it can be used to scaffold complex and extended learning tasks (Roberts, Maor and Herrington, 2016). A PebblePad workbook is effective because it allows the content designer to provide in-context prompts, and the immediacy of this advice provides 'just in time' scaffolding for the writer. This type of support is generally appreciated by the students and, in this implementation, many commented how easy it was to use the AT1 workbook. In addition, the workbook provided each student with an artefact in their portfolio as a representation of their first reflective writing submission, along with the prompts that they used to construct it.

While providing this type of support during a writing task is likely to always improve the end product, there is a trap that educators need to be wary of. A key feature of the 'scaffolding' concept is that a scaffold is provided for the learner within their Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978) but it is then removed as a learner becomes more competent (Palincsar, 1986). It is important, therefore, that a student must ultimately progress to a level where they can write reflectively, without relying on prompts. It is imperative that every assessment task should provide some degree of freedom, where students are required to think for themselves about structure and design. Further, as students' progress through their course, they should be enabled to respond to assessment briefs independently, without needing detailed instructions, steps or examples.

The final task in the AT1 workbook is for the students to copy the individual responses from each page and paste them into a textbox on a final submission page. While this might seem a little redundant, it actually is a very significant step. It allows the student to see their response as a whole submission. They can use this page to proof read, look for meaning and flow and check the total word count. More importantly, this step enables the student to see their response without the prompts in place. The final submission will, therefore, represent a standalone reflective writing piece for them to use as a guide for future tasks.

Conclusion

A course wide embedded portfolio of evidence is a worthy target, although this goal requires significant investment and takes considerable time. While every educator in the course can contribute by providing portfolio-based assessment tasks, the students need to ultimately take responsibility for their own collection and the reflective sense-making that goes with it. The skills for this reflection, however, should not be assumed and students need to be supported to build their capacity to think and then write reflectively.

References

Cohen-Sayag, E., & Fischl, D. (2012). Reflective writing in pre-service teachers' teaching: What does it promote? *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 37(10), 20-36.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2006). *Powerful teacher education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Gelfuso, A., & Dennis, D. (2014). Getting reflection off the page: The challenges of developing support structures for pre-service teacher reflection. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 38, 1-11.

Masters, J. (2016). Ready? Action! Building a portfolio of evidence in teacher education. In *ePortfolios Australia Forum 2016: Connecting Learning with the Future*. pp. 17-24, Sydney, Australia. Retrieved from https://eportfoliosaustralia.files.wordpress.com/2016/10/ebook_eportfolioforum_2016_papers_v1_20160927.pdf

Oakley, G., Pegrum, M., & Johnston, S. (2014). Introducing e-portfolios to pre-service teachers as tools for reflection and growth: Lessons learnt. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 42(1), 36–50.

Palincsar, A. S. (1986). The role of dialogue in providing scaffolded instruction. *Educational Psychologist*, 21(1 & 2), 73–98.

Roberts, P., Maor, D., & Herrington, J. (2016). ePortfolio-Based learning environments: Recommendations for effective scaffolding of reflective thinking in higher education. *Journal of Educational Technology and Society*, 19(4), 22-33.

Ryan, M. (2011). Improving reflective writing in higher education: A social semiotic perspective. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 16(1), 99-111.

Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group. (2014). *Action now: Classroom ready teachers*. Canberra, ACT: Department of Education and Training. Retrieved from http://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/action_now_classroom_ready_teachers_accessible.pdf.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.